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ON MEDIAEVAL AND RENAISSANCE WOODWORK, WITH ESPECIAL REFERENCE TO ANCIENT SEATING.

By

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It is a task of no small difficulty at the present day to give a sufficiently exact picture of the arrangement and furniture of the dwelling rooms in the first periods of the middle ages, for we are hardly in a position to comprehend very clearly from the few buildings which are still extant even the outlines of the domestic architecture of times so far removed from our own. We know indeed that both the exterior and interior of these houses were of the greatest simplicity, the palace itself, the residence of the prince, forming no exception, for the entire region of art in those times concentrated itself in ecclesiastical architecture, and it was not until towards the end of the period of Gothic art that the rich merchants began to arrange their houses with some degree of comfort and elegance. It may therefore be confidently asserted that, in the older mediæval times, the furniture of the dwelling rooms was limited merely to the most indispensable articles, and that almost all that variety of objects, which we now heap up in our rooms, and without which we hardly think we can live, had no existence whatever in those times; still less was there any need of those appliances of art in this department, which we find in such distinctness among the Greeks and Romans; this may clearly be recognised from the descriptions and representations of the furniture of that time, which usually show very primitive forms, but are either of costly material, or richly inlaid with gold, silver or ivory, a plain proof that the artistic value of any object was less considered than the intrinsic worth of the material. The reason of the extensive use of costly insertions in the furniture of that time may be found in the fact that such

productions of Romanesque art were necessarily borrowed from the smaller architectonic creations of the preceding period of old Christian art, or at least felt their influence, and it is well known that in this period, the ecclesiastical furniture, such as altars, ambones, choir enclosures &c., were of a peculiar technic, which consisted in a mosaic of coloured marbles or glasses in ornamental patterns, known under the name of *opus Alexandrinum* and *opus Grecanicum*. The couches of mediæval times were usually partly covered with rich draperies, so that their forms were hardly to be seen.

The next point to be remarked in connexion with furniture of this kind is, that the use of chairs did not become common till latter mediæval times, before which benches were usually employed as seats which, being also constructed as locked chests, served to hold household articles, especially linen and the like. These benches were fastened to the walls, and in a measure supplied the interior architecture. There certainly do occur chairs in mediæval houses but they were looked upon rather as seats of honour and only appropriated to the heads of the family, or to distinguished guests whom it was intended to receive with especial honour. These rare chairlike seats seem to have had turned legs or posts, and open-work elbows, while the backs were covered with tightly stretched cloth. We must acknowledge that our ideas of the nature of these articles of furniture are only formed from representations in old manuscripts or on windows &c. But the local traditions also, the manners and customs of the people of the middle ages, as well as the climate, have produced many improvements; the

South, for example, shows forms which are borrowed from antique models, while in the North of Europe, particularly in Scandinavia, fantastic figures of fishes and dragons are often seen, and even the Norse myths are drawn into the circle of their ornamental representations. In proof of this we may cite some Norwegian chairs belonging to the twelfth century, represented in figs. 1, 2 and 3, the framework of which consists of four heavy square posts with carved tops; the backs, which are higher, have a shelflike leaning board with fantastic heads and bodies of sea-monsters supported by flat baluster-like shafts. The seat is on all four sides lined with carved boards, an improvement which is found also in the later pieces of furniture of the middle ages, but this lining is, usually, a real chest, made to lock, and sometimes covered with rich ironwork. Fig. 4 shows a chair of this kind from Oberkirchen, of the late Gothic period, worthy moreover of attention by its delicate surface-treatment, a characteristic of the later times of the mediæval period, to which we shall have occasion to return.

Almost as scant is our acquaintance with the nature of the Church furniture of the Romanesque period of the middle ages: the still existing stalls which we have especially in view belong, with but very few exceptions, to the thirteenth century, but the examples we possess from this time prove the existence of a long practised technic in the manner of their treatment.

The most ancient Romanesque stalls with which we are acquainted are to be met with at Ratzeburg, in Mecklenburg-Strelitz, and Loccum to the west of Hanover. The first (figs. 5 and 6) belonging to the twelfth century show that separation of seats which became general in later times, formed by large projecting elbows, between which the seats are let up and down. These stalls though rough and heavy in their make and configuration, corresponding completely to the Romanesque stone architecture of the twelfth century, present to us nevertheless, especially in the upper cushion-like form of the elbows, in connexion with the curved parts beneath, a very remarkable motive which might well be adopted in modern furniture architecture in richer and more elegant forms: this and similar examples are the originators of the development of the later Gothic stalls. If in this case the stall-partitions have any claim upon our interest, we have, in the second specimen, to which we have alluded above, namely the Choir-stalls of Loccum, to pay especial attention to the side pieces, which close the row of stalls. (Figs. 7 and 8.) The original form of these end enclosures is extraordinarily primitive, a board canted on the upper part to receive a straight capping board provided on the side with small blossomlike ornamental carving. On the other hand, the ornament which spreads itself regularly over the whole exterior surface of the sidepieces is most interesting, the contour being very noble and graceful, though the foliage is wholly conventional, corresponding with the general character of the Romanesque ornamentation of the period; the variously intertwined scrolls are formed as flat bands and adorned with the well known Romanesque tooth ornament. The lower

partitions of the same stalls have pierced finials, the carved scrolls of which are in little harmony with the closed wainscoting.

As a third example of the Choir-stalls of the thirteenth century we may here mention the stalls in the cathedral of Parenzo, as represented in the records on »the Monuments of the Austrian Empire«.

Entirely different are the stalls of the Gothic period; the form is more varied and organic, the ornamentation no longer spreads itself luxuriantly over the sides, but is distributed and enclosed by strongly profiled mouldings, and has a far better effect. The general arrangement of the stalls, which remains the same in the mediæval period of art as in the Renaissance, is as follows.

The stalls having high backs with panellings, generally finished above with a covering of greater or less richness, either sloping upwards, in the form of a quadrant with a cornice above, or surmounted by overhanging canopies of open tabernacle-work, are arranged on both sides along the wall of the Choir, having a moveable seat in suitable height from the ground which can be raised or lowered between the two sides. Through these partitions, which, about the height of the shoulders, are connected with one another by curved and boldly profiled capping-mouldings, the stalls are divided into separate single seats (figs. 9, 10a, 10b). This division is continued generally in the wainscoting of the backs, and also in the canopies, so that here, out of the simple, straight or curved panelling there results a series of vault-like coverings with fine tracery, crocketed pediments, pinnacles, finials, &c., especially in later Gothic. On the ends, these rows of seats are terminated by very richly treated enclosures, which in the early Gothic period generally show freely developed curves lying in the upper part under the superstructure, and connecting it in some way with the sides of the lower part of the stalls. In front of this row of seats is a lower piece of wainscoting, with a small sloping board, forming a sort of reading desk, which frequently serves for the back of a second row of seats, terminated also by an end-enclosure, but of a different form from the higher stalls. The general impression of stalls of this kind, consisting of so many different elements in juxta position, is that of an extraordinarily rich and effective picture: the profile of the whole, the various bits of pierced work, the strong articulations, the rich canopy-work, which by their projections produce upon the dark brown tint of the woodwork a wonderful effect of light and shade; then, the artistically carved ornaments which enliven the surfaces, arches, spandrils, deep hollows and other architectonic parts; in short the combination of all these elements produces an object of art of the very first order in the province of mediæval architecture. It is true that the relative value of these art productions varies considerably, for they have had to undergo the most manifold changes in the course of several centuries. Thus the older forms are generally much slenderer and simpler, of limited height, the mouldings round and with no stiffness, the decoration in due proportion to the structural parts of the stalls, and especially

to the surfaces, forming a direct contrast to the principle of the later Gothic decoration: throughout the whole there is observed a delightful variety, and the spectator is enchained by the strongly curved but still simple contours, the pleasing effect of the entire structure, and the perfect harmony of all the parts, while on a closer observation the eye rests with pleasure on the graceful knobs and flowerets which in their naturalism are peculiar to this early Gothic period, or on the rich foliage ornament of the finials which surmount the arched ends of the partitions: tracery occurs only exceptionally, gables and pinnacles &c., not at all (see the stalls of St. Gereon's Church in Cologne, Figs. 11, 12, 13, and the end-enclosures of the stalls of the Stiftskirche in Xanten, Fig. 14: also details of the Church in Marienfeld in Westphalia Figs. 15—19, and St. Stephen's Church in Constance Fig. 20).

On an attentive examination of the vegetable ornaments of the older Gothic period, we frequently recognise a certain agreement in the treatment of the leafwork with that of the early Renaissance, less indeed in the form of the leaves themselves, than in their plastic execution and application. In both art-periods is the foliage borrowed from nature, conventionalised as need required, and executed with due regard to the material, but without any

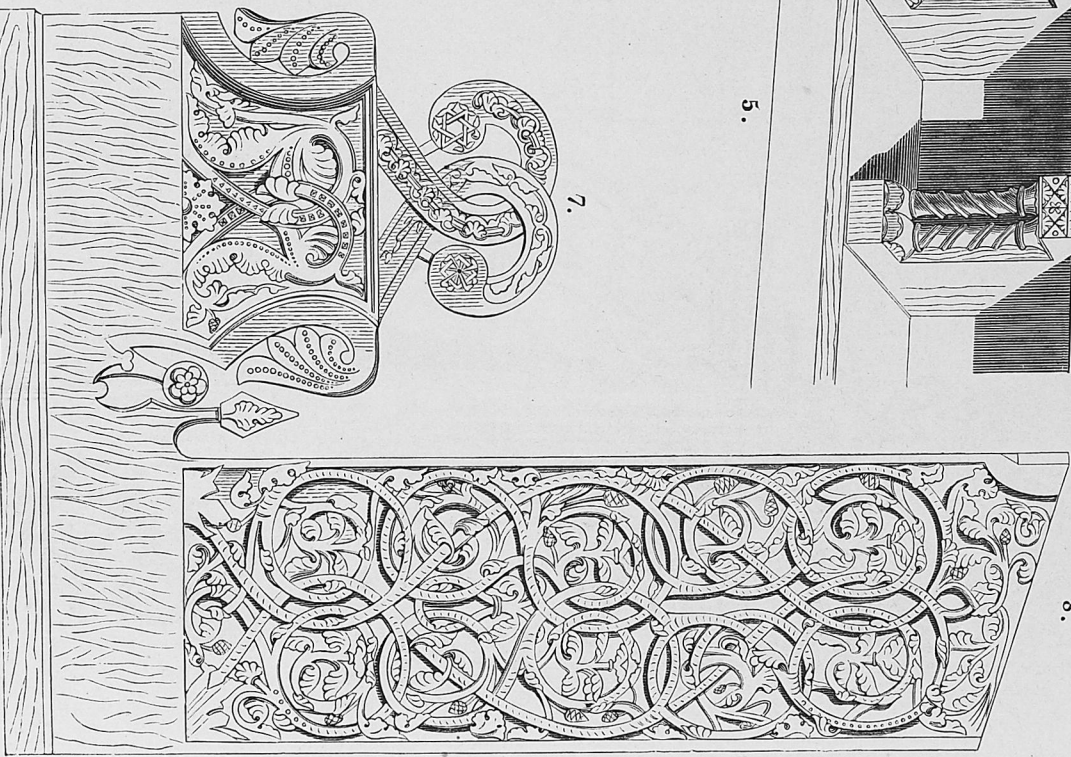
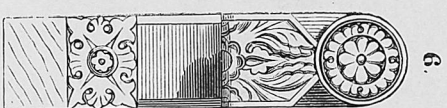
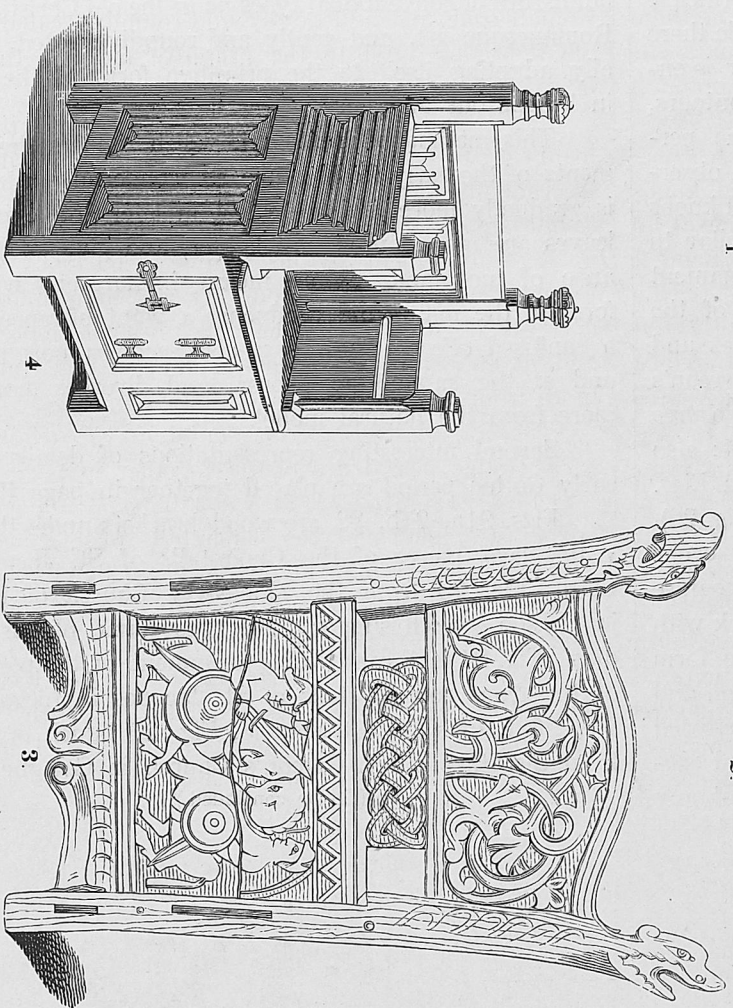
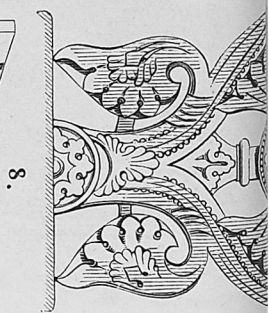
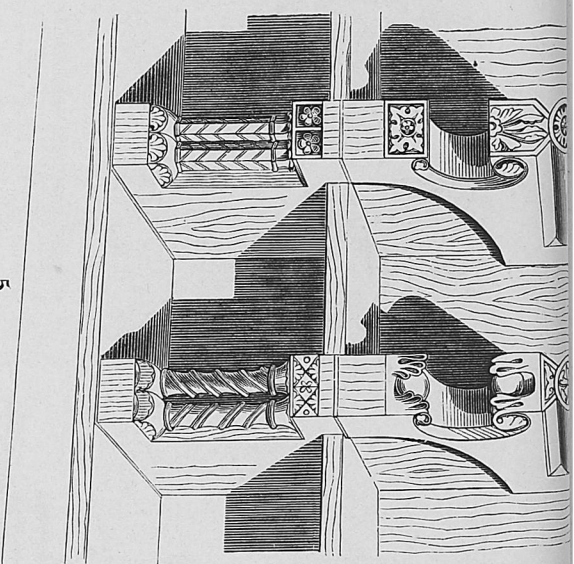
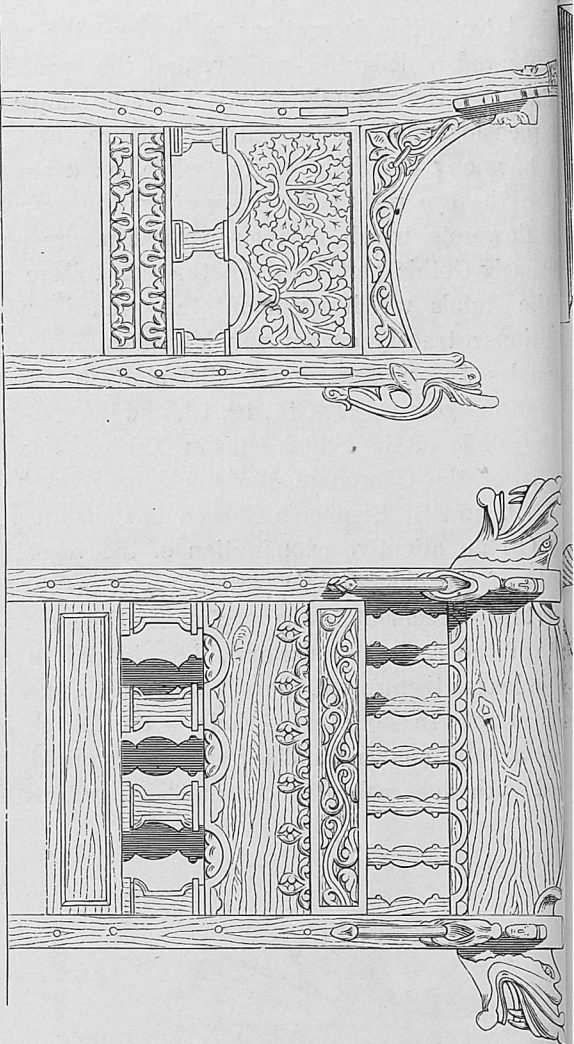
admixture of conventional types as in the old Christian and Romanesque art, and gently and roundly treated, naturally adapting itself to the primitive form of the whole in its contour and lines.

This method of treatment, which renders the ornaments of the early Gothic time so wonderfully attractive, is gradually more and more lost in later Gothic art; the leaves are more curled and lighter, and give an appearance of movement by no means in harmony with the form of the mass, and producing a want of repose, and a confused effect. The foliage also becomes more pointed and at the same time poorer, and diverges more and more from the natural model.

Several interesting representations of details of the early Gothic period are placed together in page III.

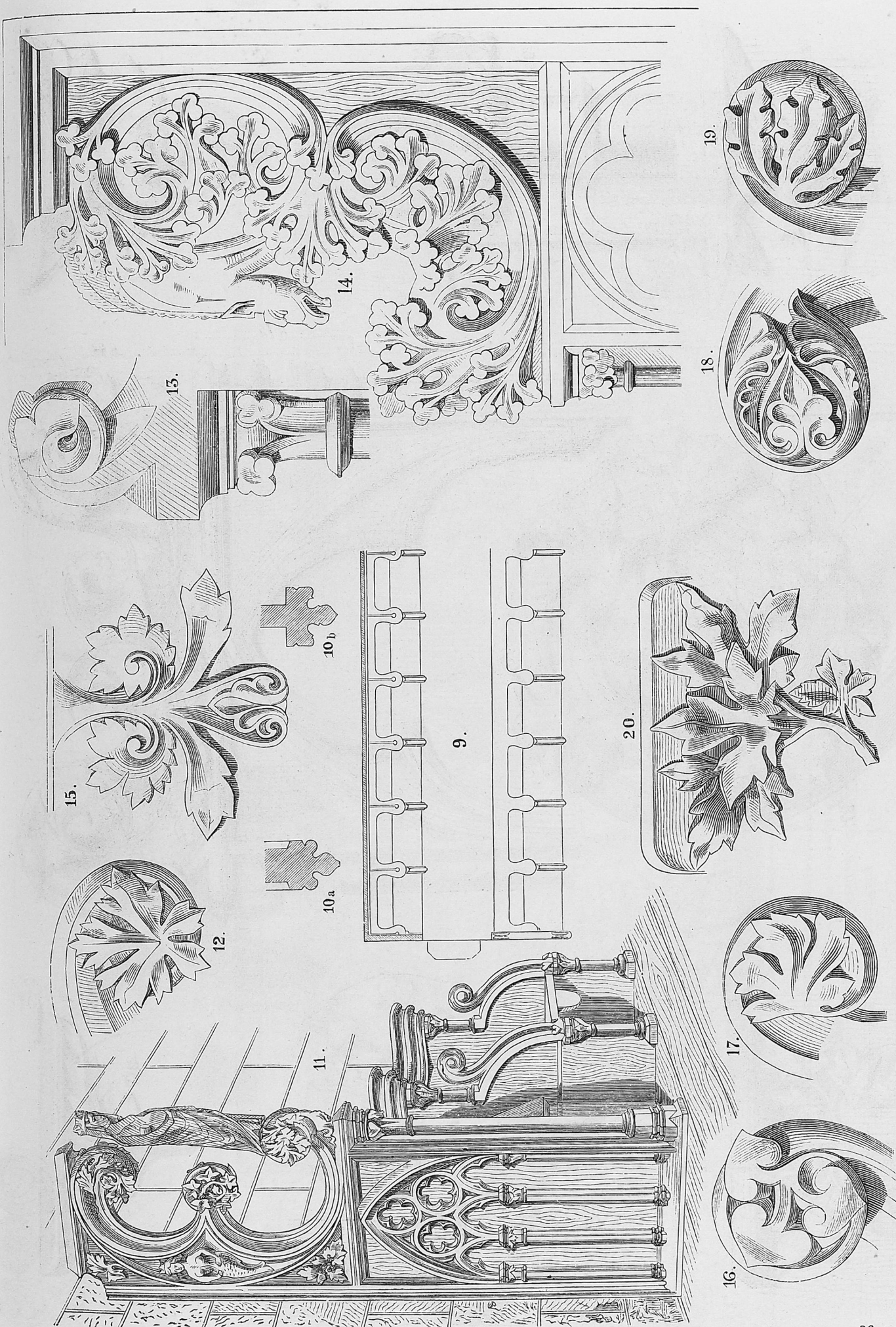
Figs. 21a, 21b, 22 are wood brackets under the moveable seat pieces of the Choirstalls of St. Jacques at Liege: Fig. 23 from the Monastery Church of Hainau in Hessen. Such supports bear the name of *Misericordias*. Fig. 24 is the crowning ornament of the partitions of the front row of stalls of St. Jacques in Liege, Figs. 25, 26 Details from the same, Fig. 27 bunch of leaves from the stalls of St. Gereon's Church in Cologne.

(To be continued.)



Figs. 1—3. Romanesque Stalls from Norway.
Fig. 4. Gothic Stalls in Obernkirchen Church.

Figs. 5 and 6. Romanesque Stalls in Ratzeburg Church.
Figs. 7 and 8. Romanesque End Enclosures of Stalls in Loccum Church.



Figs. 9 and 10. General Arrangement of Rows of Mediæval Stalls. Figs. 11—13. Stalls of St. Gereon Church in Cologne. Fig. 14. End Enclosure of Stalls of Xanten Church.
Figs. 15—19. Details of Stalls in Marienfeld Church. Fig. 20. Details of Stalls in St. Stephen Church, Constance.

Figs. 21a—22. 24—26. Details of Stalls in St. Jacob's Church in Liege.

Fig. 23. Details of Stalls of Haina Church.

Fig. 27. Details of Stalls of St. Gereon Church in Cologne.

